

# Creating Safe, Engaging and Educational Spaces and Experiences for Disenfranchised Youth: Young People's Perspectives

Marilyn Casley\*, Martina Bateson\*\*

**Abstract:** Participation in extended education opportunities benefits development and learning. However, an increasing number of Australian children and young people are becoming disenfranchised from formal schooling and face access barriers to extended education offerings. In this article we present and discuss the voices of young people who participated in two early intervention programs aimed at promoting positive development and psycho-social-educational outcomes in disenfranchised youth. Their narratives demonstrate how relational, youth-centred, flexible and holistic engagement practices promote safety, trust and a sense of belonging. In the context of relational and environmental safety, participants engaged in experiences which foster development and learning and, thus, accessed their right to education. We discuss the findings drawing on trauma-informed practices, ecological systems theory and children's rights and highlight the importance of listening to children and young people and acting on what they have to say.

**Keywords:** Disenfranchised youth, educational engagement programs, children's rights, trauma-informed practice, ecological systems theory, children and young people's voices

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## Introduction

Participation in extended education opportunities such as outside school hours services, interest-based private tutoring, school-based extra-curricular activities or community-based courses or programs provides children and young people with a vast array of experiences to foster physical, cognitive and socio-emotional development (Schüpbach & Lilla, 2019; Sivan & Siu, 2017; Stecher, 2018). However, access to these educational spaces and activities is unequally distributed. Cost, age, transport and other eligibility criteria, such as regular school

\* Griffith University, School of Allied Health, Sport and Social Work

\*\* **Corresponding Author:** Griffith University, School of Allied Health, Sport and Social Work, m.bateson@griffith.edu.au

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attendance, create barriers to taking advantage of extended education opportunities, in particular for school-aged children and young people from low socio-economic backgrounds and who have been disenfranchised from schooling (Bae et al., 2019; Bae & Stecher, 2019; O'Donnell & Redmond, 2021). This children's rights and social justice issue is of concern to children, young people, families and communities.

In this article, we bring together the perspectives of young people aged 10 to 17 on two programs aimed at engaging youth at risk of becoming disenfranchised from formal education. The first, *Resolve*, is an early intervention youth outreach, diversion and coaching program aimed at diverting young people from the criminal justice system and supporting their engagement in pro-social and personally meaningful activities. The second, *Youth in Power*, combined adventure-based group learning with intensive one-on-one mentoring to promote positive development in youth considered to be at risk of adverse psycho-social-educational outcomes. Both programs were piloted at approximately the same time by two leading community services organisations in one socially disadvantaged community in Southeast Queensland, Australia.

In our conversations with program participants, we aimed to find out:

1. What supported young people's sustained engagement in *Resolve* and *Youth in Power*.
2. How participants benefitted from the programs.
3. If young people encountered any challenges and had ideas for improving the programs.

This article is focused on the potential of the two programs for promoting positive development in disenfranchised youth through educational experiences. However, we advise that *Youth in Power* and *Resolve*, in particular, were more than conventional extended education opportunities. They aimed to address significant psycho-social-educational disadvantage and marginalisation, including homelessness, acculturation stress, substance use, youth crime and poor mental health. Including these programs in the discussion of extended education is an intentional effort to (re-)frame the field from a position of equity and social justice as outlined in the literature review and promulgated by Bae and Stecher (2019) specifically.

## Literature Review

In recent years, educational discourse has been influenced by growing concerns about student disengagement from formal schooling in Australia. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2025), the Year 7 to Year 12 retention rate has declined steadily from 84.8% in 2017 to 79.9% in 2024, indicating that, currently, one in five young Australians leave school early. School attendance levels for Year 1 to Year 10 have also declined. The percentage of students with attendance at or above 90 per cent was 59.8% in 2024, down from 61.6% in 2023 (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2024). This too could be a factor in Year 12 retention rates.

Far from being universal, there are significant demographic variations in this trend. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, the Year 7 to 12 retention rate is alarmingly low at 56.7%. Similarly, socio-economic status and residential area impact scholastic attainment. In 2021, 74% of students in low socioeconomic areas met the requirements of a Year 12 or